Phoebe Palmer: The Mother of the Holiness Movement

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Phoebe Palmer was the most influential woman in the American Methodist Church at a time when the Methodist church was the largest Christian denomination in America.[1] Her adult life was full of

astonishing achievements in ministry. Her strength and determination in ministry came from her absolute assurance that God would bless her work. This article looks at various aspects of Phoebe's ministry drawn largely from Charles Edward White's well-researched book entitled *The Beauty of Holiness: Phoebe Palmer as Theologian, Revivalist, Feminist and Humanitarian.*[2]

Phoebe's Early Influences

Phoebe was born in New York in 1807 into a staunchly Methodist family. While still a teenager, her father had been "born again" after hearing John Wesley preach at a 5.00 am meeting. Phoebe's parents were dedicated and disciplined Christians. Twice a day they held family worship times at home, as well as prayers at mealtimes. Phoebe was always obedient to her parents and, following their example, she would grow up to be a dedicated, disciplined, and hardworking person in God's service.

Phoebe was a spiritually sensitive child. She could not remember a time when she was not a believing Christian. She struggled and agonised for years because she had missed out on a definite conversion experience and because she had not felt the emotions that accompanied deliverance from sin that other Methodists spoke about. Phoebe even doubted at times that God had truly accepted her as his child.

Phoebe was an avid reader. As well as reading the Bible, she read biographies of famous Methodists, including the biographies of Methodist women preachers and role models such as Mary Bosanquet Fletcher, Hester Ann Rogers, and Nancy Cutler. Phoebe was also well acquainted with the lives of John Wesley and Susannah Wesley. There can be little doubt that young Phoebe was inspired by reading these biographies. The examples of Methodist women leaders were probably one reason why she never seemed to have personal qualms about being a woman in ministry herself.

In 1826, when she was 19 years old, Phoebe married a young man named Walter Palmer. Walter was a respected homoeopathic surgeon. The Palmers were compatible and made an effective ministry team, with Phoebe taking a more leading role. Phoebe was a devoted wife and soon became a devoted mother. Sadly, three of the Palmers' children died in infancy. While she initially grieved, Phoebe came to accept

the deaths as part of God's will.[3] She believed that God had taken her children because she loved them too much and had made them like idols. Phoebe and Walter had three surviving children.[4]

In 1831, Phoebe and Walter went to live with Sarah Lankford and her husband. Sarah was Phoebe's older sister. Phoebe had been greatly influenced in Christian thought and practice by her parent's beliefs, but it was her sister Sarah who introduced Phoebe to the doctrine and experience of Holiness, also known as Entire Sanctification. Phoebe's religious struggles and insecurities finally ended when she experienced Holiness for herself on July the 26th, 1837, a day she referred to as her "Day of Days". This spiritual experience of Holiness affected her profoundly and she would never again doubt that God had accepted her as his child. Phoebe would also never doubt that she was meant to be a worker for her Lord.

Phoebe's Varied Early Ministries

In April 1837, Phoebe was asked to lead a Bible study for the young women in her church. She prepared thoroughly for the studies. The class quickly became popular and the increasing numbers meant that the class kept outgrowing the rooms assigned to it. Phoebe would lead this class for eight years. In 1838, several months after her experience of Holiness, Phoebe began speaking at Holiness Camp Meetings;[5] and in 1839, she became the first woman in New York to lead and have pastoral care of a Methodist "class".[6] All of Phoebe's early ministries met with immediate success.

As well as teaching and speaking, it seems that whenever Phoebe saw a need she would attempt to meet that need. In the 1840s-1850s especially, she led, or helped to organise, several benevolent ladies' associations which assisted different groups of people. Phoebe and her ladies ministered personally to orphans and prostitutes in Five Points, a slum area of New York infamous for appalling squalor, poverty, and crime.[7] Phoebe also personally ministered to prisoners, to widows with small children, and to freed slaves. Furthermore, she was instrumental in organising church plants in poor neighbourhoods. The range of humanitarian ministries Phoebe was involved in was truly extraordinary.

Phoebe's other ministry activities included being part of a women's temperance association,[8] attempting to evangelise Jewish people,[9] and persuading the American Methodist Church to send five missionaries to China for the first time in 1847. Phoebe could be very persuasive and persistent.

Phoebe's Preaching Ministry

Phoebe ministered practically by providing for people's physical needs, but she was especially known for her spiritual and theological teaching. She taught about the gift of Holiness, or Entire Sanctification, as a second spiritual blessing, or second grace, after justification.[10] Phoebe taught about Holiness in a Tuesday afternoon meeting which met in her home at 2.30 pm on Tuesdays for almost forty years.[11] These meetings often attracted Methodist bishops, missionaries, university and seminary professors, as well as ministers from many different denominations, and (mostly) upper-middle-class women and their husbands. Men and women, clergy and laity, were equally encouraged by Phoebe to speak and testify in these meetings.

The Tuesday Meetings were greatly blessed by God and a spiritual revival was launched. As the news of revival spread, Phoebe and her husband Walter were asked to speak at hundreds of churches and camp meetings in America and Canada. The Palmers also spent four years in the British Isles speaking to thousands of people about Holiness.[12] Phoebe taught and preached about Holiness because she was convinced that sanctification was the key to revival. In all, the Palmers would speak at over 300 camp meetings and many thousands of people were saved and sanctified through the ministry of Phoebe and Walter, who often spoke several times a day for weeks on end.

Methodist Camp Meeting, March 1 1819.
Engraving by Jacques Gérard Milbert (1766-1840) (Wikimedia)

Phoebe's Writing Ministry

Throughout her ministry, Phoebe was a prolific writer. She wrote countless letters, articles, tracts and books, as well as hymns and poems.

Phoebe received hundreds of unsolicited letters from people wanting her advice and wanting to know more about her doctrine of Holiness. And she dutifully replied to these letters. Phoebe was also prompted to write letters whenever she saw a need or a problem that she felt needed to be addressed. She did not hesitate to write to Methodist bishops to offer her advice, corrections or suggestions. She was an influential confidante to several Methodist bishops who highly respected her. Phoebe even wrote to Queen Victoria, twice, because she was concerned that the Queen's Sabbath (i.e. Sunday) activities, such as taking a trip on the royal yacht, may have been putting the Queen's soul in peril. There was no reply to these two letters.

In the 1840s, Phoebe wrote and published three major books—*The Way of Holiness* (1843), *Entire Devotion to God* (1845), and *Faith and its Effects* (1848)—and more books followed. In all, she wrote eighteen books of practical theology, biography, and poetry. One of her books, entitled, *The Promise of the Father,* is a 400-page work in which Phoebe presents several well-researched and carefully thought out arguments showing that women can minister as preachers and speakers.[13]

> Ranging from Justin Martyr to Queen Victoria, Mrs Palmer defended her thesis by appealing to Hebrew and Greek etymology, the Old and New Testaments, the church fathers, the example of female leaders in early Methodism, and the evident blessing of God upon women's ministries in her own day. (White 2008:33)

In the *Promise of the Father*, Phoebe wrote that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost meant that women, as well as men, could not only speak publicly about Gospel but that they both had a *duty* to proclaim the Gospel. However, she did not tackle the issue of women's ordination in her book. [*Promise of the Father* is freely accessible online here.]

In 1864, the Palmers bought a widely circulated magazine entitled *The Way of Holiness*, and Phoebe became its editor until her death in 1874.[14] *The Way of Holiness* was first published in 1839 by a family friend of the Lankfords and Palmers, and Phoebe had been a regular contributor to the magazine from the beginning.

Phoebe was a member of the New York City Tract Society. This society, founded in 1827, was the "first permanent city mission. . . [T]he society sought to evangelize the entire city by taking tracts to every dwelling and leading the receptive to Christ. . . It focussed its concern on the poor and began to take food, medicine and clothing along with the gospel. (White 2008:220) Phoebe wrote many tracts and tirelessly distributed them in an area designated to her by the society. She also gave out food, clothing and money.

Phoebe's ministry was not without controversy which was mainly spread through the use of tracts. Catherine Booth, who with her husband William had started the Salvation Army, was dismayed by the tracts that criticised Phoebe Palmer and her ministry. These tracts criticised Phoebe's doctrine of sanctification, as well as the fact that Phoebe was a woman who spoke publicly in church services and camp meetings. However, Catherine was also dismayed by the tracts of those who supported Phoebe, because these stated that Phoebe's ministry as a woman was allowable only as a rare exception. Catherine decided to study what the Bible said about women as preachers. Catherine also read Phoebe's book, *The Promise of the Father*. As a result of her study, Catherine wrote her own tract stating that the Bible did not prohibit women from speaking ministries. Due to her findings, Catherine began her own preaching ministry.

Phoebe's Personality

White includes this unflattering description of Phoebe in his book:

> There was about her but little of personal attractiveness. Simple in manner and plain in person and dress, even to severity, hesitant in speech and almost destitute of emotion in all her addresses and exercises . . ." [15]

Barbara Howes, however, gives a slightly different impression with her comment that by 1866 Phoebe was a “well-polished public speaker”.

By all accounts, Phoebe seems to have been a serious and earnest person. In White’s biography, there is nothing that shows she had a warm or affectionate personality, or that her humanitarian ministries were motivated by compassion. It may be that many pious Christians of her day likened holiness to gravity, and ministry was motivated by a sense of duty rather than compassion and empathy.

On the boat trip over to England, Phoebe criticised a Methodist minister who was playing board games with the passengers. She thought it was a bad example for his flock. (The minister assured Phoebe that while he did play board games he did not play cards.) Phoebe also organised daily prayer meetings on board the ship and could not understand why any of the several ministers on board had not done so. Quaint anecdotes such as these show that Phoebe had strict ideas about how Christian morality and holiness should be practised.

Phoebe’s Theology

Phoebe believed in Wesley’s theology of Prevenient Grace[16] which meant that she believed every person should be given the opportunity to be saved and every church the opportunity to be renewed. Phoebe also believed that unsaved people were desperate sinners already condemned. She taught that “Believers must therefore not rest night or day without warning the unsaved of their dangerous state.” (White 2008:170) According to Phoebe, all Christians were meant to evangelise: men and women, clergy and laity. Unflinchingly, she frequently compared Christians who did not evangelise to murderers. (White 2008:170) Phoebe’s concern for the salvation of people’s souls was a major motivation in her ministry.

Phoebe’s belief in earthly and heavenly rewards also motivated her ministry. “Drawing on Daniel 12:3 and Revelation 2:10 and 12:1, she maintained that the more souls one brings to the Lord, the more stars one will have in their heavenly crown . . .” (White 2008:170) She also lived with the expectation that Jesus would soon return. This expectation gave a sense of urgency to her ministry.

Phoebe took the Bible very seriously. Nevertheless, in forming her own theology on various subjects, she was influenced by experience, reason, the Methodist tradition as well as Scripture. Phoebe had her own well-thought theology and clearly articulated views on revivals, women in ministry, lay evangelism, and of course Holiness. Phoebe is rightfully regarded as "The Mother of the Holiness Movement" and she is seen by many as the link between Wesleyan revivalism and modern Pentecostalism.

Conclusion

Following her experience of Entire Sanctification, Phoebe never seemed insecure or shy about her abilities in ministry. While she was aware of detractors who argued that a woman should not be speaking to mixed groups, it seems that these detractors did not deter or bother Phoebe or her husband. Nor was she fazed by the very few projects that ultimately failed. Phoebe seems so resolute and assured in her ministries, probably because of her immediate and remarkable successes that saw many thousands of men and women become Christians and receive the second grace of Holiness.

Phoebe's spiritual experience of Holiness brought energy to her devotion to God and to her 37 years of ministry. Moreover, she was utterly convinced that she was on earth to work for the Lord and this assured her that God would bless everything she attempted. Phoebe took the promise in 1 Corinthians 15:58 personally: that her labour would not be in vain. She consistently displayed outstanding strength, hard work, efficiency, persistence,[17] and longevity in ministry, but ultimately it was her unwavering, faithful reliance on God's blessing that brought success to her ministries.

> *Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. 1 Corinthians 15:58 (NIV 2011)*

Footnotes

[1] In 1850, The American Methodist Church had over 1.2 million members, amounting to 5.4% of America's population of approximately 23 million people.

[2] Charles Edward White is the Professor of Christian Thought and History in the School of Arts and Sciences at Spring Arbor University, Michigan.

[3] One infant died horrifically from burns caused by a nurse's carelessness. I was personally disturbed to read about Phoebe's rationalisation and her calm resignation over the deaths of her children.

[4] All three of the Palmers' surviving children went into professional Christian service.

[5] Camp meetings were revival meetings held outdoors or in large tents. The camp meetings would usually be held over several days. Phoebe would speak at over 300 camp meetings throughout her 37 years of ministry. It is unclear, however, how Phoebe began in this ministry.

[6] A leader of a Methodist class effectively functioned as a pastor under the oversight of an ordained minister. Information about Methodist classes in the 1800s can be found here.
http://www.crivoice.org/creedclass.html

[7] When Charles Dickens visited that same area in 1842, he was accompanied by two tough policemen acting as bodyguards. On page 63 of his book, White includes a quote from Charles Dickens where he describes the filth, debauchery, crime, and decay of Five Points.

[8] While her speaking ministry on Holiness was usually well-received, Phoebe's messages against alcohol were often met with resistance, particularly during her ministry in the British Isles.

[9] Phoebe held a regular meeting for Jewish Christians for several years, but it failed to convert Jewish people to Christianity. Phoebe was also keen to send missionary teams to Palestine to minister to the Jews and she wrote a book about ministry to the Jews. Phoebe even adopted a young destitute Jewish boy from the slums of New York as her own son; however, it ended badly when his biological mother reclaimed him. Phoebe's ministry to the Jews was not successful and her book about ministry to the Jews was one of the least popular. White does not reveal how Phoebe dealt with these "failures".

[10] Phoebe Palmer and other Methodists taught that Entire Sanctification, also known as Christian Perfection, is received through faith, just as justification-salvation is. Entire Sanctification is also linked with the Baptism, or fullness, of the Holy Spirit.

[11] The Tuesday Meeting for the Promotion of Holiness was started by Sarah Lankford, Phoebe's sister, on the 9th of February, 1836. Men began attending 1839. Phoebe took over the leadership of the meetings in 1840 when her sister moved out of the area. Phoebe continued to lead the meetings for 34 more years. The meetings ended in 1874, the same year as Phoebe's death. During the 40 years that the Tuesday Meetings ran, thousands of people had attended the Tuesday meetings. Up to 300 could attend at one time necessitating the Palmers to build an extension to their house and later move into a larger house. It was important to Phoebe that the meetings would be non-denominational and not meet in a church building. There could be ministers from 30 different denominations at one meeting. Some people who attended the Tuesday Meeting went on to start their own, and in 1887, 238 similar meetings were taking place around the world.

[12] 17,500 Brits were saved and thousands sanctified during the four-year ministry of the Palmers in the British Isles. Phoebe had a well thought out method for holding revival meetings and she had requests and stipulations that needed to be met by a congregation before she accepted an invitation to speak. One of these stipulations was that records be kept of the people who responded to altar calls for salvation or sanctification.

[13] The full name of this book is *The Promise of the Father: or, A Neglected Speciality of the Last Days.*

[14] In 1860, the magazine had 16,000 subscribers. In 1870-1873 it reached its peak with 37,000 subscribers. The magazine ceased publication at the end of 1901.

[15] "Mrs Phoebe Palmer" by F.B.O. Home in *Zion's Herald*, November 12th, 1874, p.361.

[16] The *United Methodist Book of Discipline* (2004) defines prevenient grace as ". . . the divine love that surrounds all humanity and precedes any and all of our conscious impulses. This grace prompts our first wish to please God, our first glimmer of understanding concerning God's will, and our 'first slight transient

conviction' of having sinned against God. God's grace also awakens in us an earnest longing for deliverance from sin and death and moves us toward repentance and faith."

[17] It took several years of persistent persuasion before Phoebe was able to persuade the Ladies' Home Missionary Society to set up a mission at Five Points. And persistent persuasion was needed before the Methodist bishops agreed to send missionaries to China.

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